EXCLUSIVE

‘IT’S A WAR’

Inside ICE’s media machine

Messages reveal how the agency has raced to satisfy the White House by pumping out videos of confrontations and arrests.

By Joyce Sohyun Lee and Drew Harwell

December 23, 2025

For the Immigration and Customs Enforcement public affairs team, the nighttime operation across metro Houston in October was a gold mine.

An ICE video producer shadowed agents as they pulled over and handcuffed more than 120 suspected undocumented immigrants, then sent the footage to a private team chatroom.

Across thousands of internal ICE messages reviewed by The Washington Post, this kind of celebration has become commonplace. The messages show how the team has worked closely with the White House, which has urged them to produce videos for social media of immigrant arrests and confrontations to portray its push for mass deportation as critical to protecting the American way of life.

Before officials could post the Houston video, they had to figure out how to frame it. Officials did not know if all the arrestees had criminal records, they wrote in the chats, undermining a slogan the team had worked to promote on social media: that ICE targeted the “Worst of the Worst.”

ICE video producer 2 Oct. 29, 2:36 p.m.

> We made several dozen arrests today very quickly. Not sure if these all had criminal histories beyond being in the US illegally.

After some discussion, the team decided on a compromise.

Instead of arguing they'd snared hardened criminals, officials wrote a caption saying the arrests showed the dangers of "illegal aliens … behind the wheel."

Then, to maximize the video's chances of going viral, they needed a soundtrack.

They settled on a rap song by Nbhd Nick, which his label would later tell The Post was used without permission, that starts, "Oh, you thought this was a game, huh?"

The video was posted to ICE's social media channels, where it has been viewed more than 1 million times in total.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
@ICEgov · Follow
ICE on the roads
We made over 120 arrests in Houston Oct. 29 — clearing our roads of dangerous, often unlicensed and uninsured, illegal aliens who should NOT be behind the wheel.
Watch on X
ICE
HOUSTON, TX
7:00 PM · Nov 2, 2025
20.8K
Reply
Copy link

For years, this ICE team had run like a routine government communications shop, dispensing public service announcements and news releases few Americans would see. But during President Donald Trump's second term, ICE's public affairs arm has rapidly transformed into an influencer-style media machine, churning out flashy videos of tactical operations and immigration raids.

The internal communications reviewed by The Post show how the ICE team has coordinated with the White House, working to satisfy Trump aides' demands to "flood the airwaves," as one official urged in the messages, with brash content

showing immigrants being chased, grabbed and detained.

They also show federal officials mocking immigrants in crass terms and discussing video edits that might help legitimize the administration's aggressive stance. The team also knowingly used copyright-protected music without permission from the rights holders, among other techniques designed to boost their online attention.

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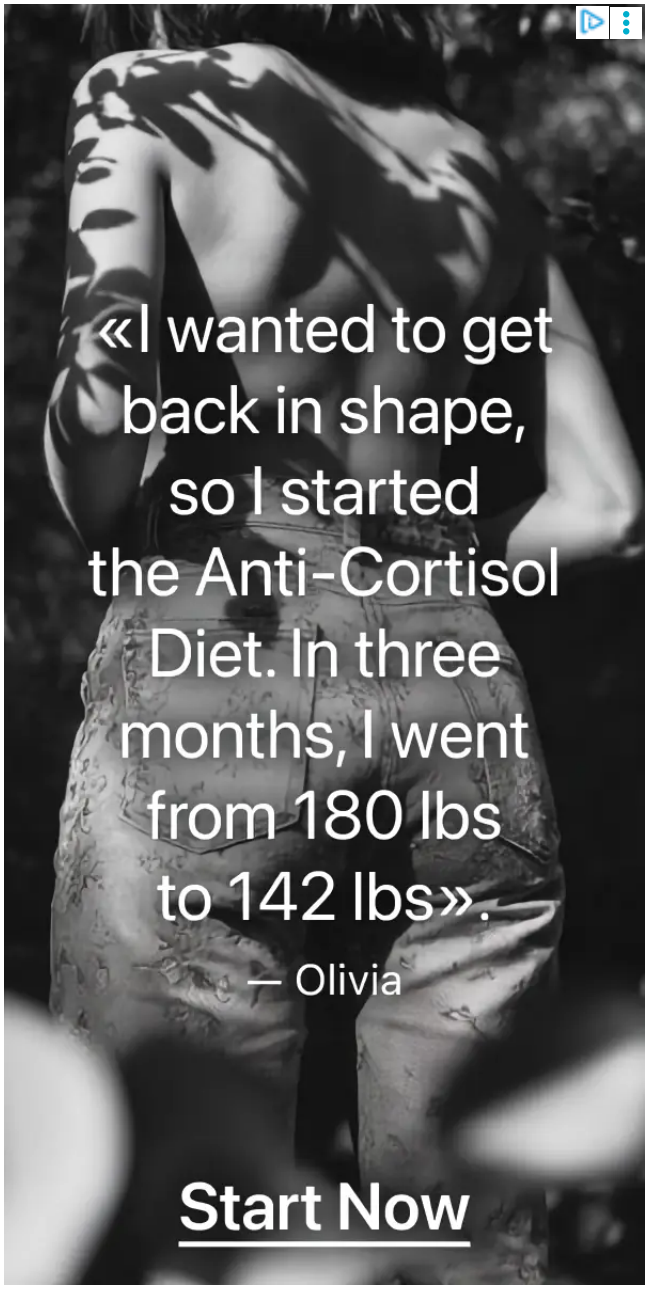
«I wanted to get back in shape, so I started the Anti-Cortisol Diet. In three months, I went from 180 lbs to 142 lbs».
— Olivia
Start Now

Six current or former officials at the Department of Homeland Security, which runs ICE, told The Post that the video effort had broken from the more careful and methodical work of past administrations. They spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation.

The Post reviewed chats and other materials provided by people familiar with internal discussions. They did so on the condition of anonymity due to the

sensitive nature of the disclosures.

David Lapan, the first DHS press secretary during Trump's first term and a longtime critic who has argued the second Trump administration politicized the agency, said the current strategy is unrecognizable compared to the more "professional and buttoned-up" operations under past presidents that worked to describe law enforcement activities clinically and apolitically, for fear of inflaming anger against agents in the field.

"We were supposed to present the facts, not hype things up. But this veers into propaganda, into creating fear," said Lapan, a retired Marine Corps colonel. "We didn't have this meme-ification of various serious operations, these things that are life or death. … It's not a joking matter. But that's the way they're treating it now."

White House spokeswoman Abigail Jackson said, "President Trump and his entire team are working at breakneck speed to keep our promises, deport criminal illegal aliens, and get information out to the public — that's a good thing and the American people deserve no less."

DHS spokeswoman Tricia McLaughlin said the White House had given the communications wings of DHS and ICE "autonomy to create content that is effectively reaching the American public." The social media posts that used copyrighted material without permission had been preapproved by administration lawyers, she said.

DHS public affairs officials, she added, were proud to break with the strategies of past administrations because their work has proved more successful at getting people's attention.

"They were irrelevant," she said, "and we've made it matter."

‘Feed the beast’

Launched after the Sept. 11 attacks, ICE and DHS had always functioned as traditional law enforcement agencies focused on public safety and with minimal tools for self-promotion.

Their public affairs divisions employed small teams of video producers, mostly for unexceptional tasks: facilitating TV interviews, running the cameras at workforce retirement ceremonies, recording safety commercials for the Super Bowl. Some producers traveled to make videos when DHS agents took down sex abusers or crime rings. Video producers would film targeted operations, a current DHS official said, but immigration enforcement was only a fraction of the workload.

After the start of Trump’s second term, however, ICE’s ranks swelled as federal agents were diverted to immigration enforcement and the One Big Beautiful Bill tripled the agency’s annual budget to deliver on the White House’s promises to secure the southern border and speed up deportations. ICE’s average arrest count jumped from around 300 a day last year to more than 800 a day since Trump took office, according to a Post analysis of ICE data released by the Deportation Data Project at the University of California at Berkeley.

DHS’s media operation was no exception. Public affairs teams were injected with a new crew of political appointees who had orders from the White House to treat immigration as their top priority and produce dramatized visuals of ICE operations and arrests to command user attention, the current and former officials told The Post. The video teams’ workload exploded, and immigration became the only topic anyone could pursue, according to interviews.

“We’re not doing child pornography cases. We’re not doing human trafficking cases,” one current DHS official told The Post. “Everything is immigration.”

ICE’s public affairs team included several dozen public affairs officers,

producers and strategists, scattered between its Washington headquarters and local field offices across the country, current DHS officials said. Members of ICE's visual communications team, embedded in the public affairs division and known as "viscom," began recording in the field more frequently, accompanying officers on raids and removal operations, shooting video day and night, interviews and chats showed. Any video producer who witnessed a particularly cinematic scene was expected to alert their supervisors, so the agency and the White House could promote it on their social media channels. Employees on ICE's "digital engagement" team then raced to edit and post the footage on social media in hopes of securing a viral win.

Emily Covington, ICE's assistant director for public affairs, frequently requested "good arrest videos" and asked the team to devote its energy to capturing "high profile arrests," the internal messages show. Laszlo Baksay, a deputy assistant director, asked the public affairs team in the chat to flag stories where "aliens with criminal history are being employed," to counter media reports that the agency was grabbing "ordinary aliens just trying to earn a living."

Covington and Baksay declined to comment further on the chat messages.

The team began working like a professional influencer operation, creating a "social media check list" of caught-on-camera arrests, sharing metrics with senior officials, using paid social media tracking tools and cataloguing all of their Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Threads and X posts, ranked by impressions and engagement rate.

Covington pushed the team in internal chats in late May to be more "proactive" in pushing out videos.

A week after Covington's message, in late May, the team got its first viral video. The clip showed ICE agents leaping out of an SUV and confronting men on the curb of a home improvement store in Baltimore. The men were shoved face down onto the street and handcuffed while an agent said, "Calle la boca" — in Spanish, "shut your mouth." In an X post, ICE called the video "action-packed."

But the real celebration came shortly after, when the White House reposted the video on its Instagram and X accounts, labeling it an "EPIC Takedown."

The post, from one of the team's political appointees, led to a burst of hearts and shock-face emojis.

As the media operation ramped up, DHS posted several videos containing clear errors around their operations, using misleading footage that showed scenes recorded thousands of miles away from where the video described, The Post has previously reported.

Other edits were aimed at presenting events in ways that supported the administration's narratives. In May, Covington asked, at the White House's request, whether a video of a deportation flight from Texas could be re-edited so that the clips "don't feature tons of females?" An ICE official responded that a video producer would "re-edit the b-roll to exclude the females," the chats show.

Officials worked to find ways to describe many of the people arrested as the "Worst of the Worst," a slogan DHS and ICE began using in January to argue that their agents hunted only the most dangerous criminals. When one official asked in the chat what producers should say in their videos when arrestees had no criminal history, another responded that they should work to find something else "newsworthy" to highlight, like an "egregious immigration history."

Public affairs officers were told to rewrite their news releases and online posts with stronger, more aggressive language if they wanted the agency's main communications channels to promote them, one said in an interview. "If the truth of the operation does not match the narrative of the 'worst of the worst,' it's going to be killed," the official said.

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The team gave right-wing media figures premium access to immigration operations and received favorable coverage. In June, about three months before he was killed, right-wing influencer Charlie Kirk posted what he said was "exclusive footage" of ICE officials arresting a "thug." Covington highlighted the moment in the team's chat, thanking one official "for getting great footage on today's arrest."

Right-wing influencers with large followings, including "Dr. Phil" McGraw and Libs of TikTok's Chaya Raichik, were regularly invited to ride along with law enforcement agents and interview senior officials, according to The Post's review of their coverage. The pro-Trump influencer Benny Johnson donned a Border Patrol tactical vest to watch a raid at a Walmart in the Chicago area alongside Homeland Security Secretary Kristi L. Noem. His X clip celebrating the "amazing" operation's "wild scenes" has been viewed 1.6 million times.

A Libs of TikTok representative declined to comment on the relationship. Representatives for Turning Point USA, the organization founded by Kirk, and Johnson did not respond to requests for comment. A representative of McGraw said he had been invited by White House border czar Tom Homan to document ICE enforcement in Chicago and Los Angeles earlier this year.

In pursuit of more viral video, DHS brought in new public affairs staff members with atypical backgrounds and authorized them to “go out and capture content,” as a chat message said. A MAGA women’s lifestyle influencer, an L.A.-based wedding videographer and a Canadian-born actor who played a “mountain man” in a cable-TV show joined the team.

DHS encouraged the hires to become intimately involved with agency affairs, the chats and interviews showed. In June, when ICE agents were raiding farms in rural Missouri, the former actor noted it would be a prime chance to make a video. “Would be great to get something like that on film,” he wrote in the chats, suggesting a tagline: “We are everywhere, we will find you.”

Later, when ICE officials complained about negative media coverage, he worked to bolster their spirits.

‘Flooding the airwaves’

By June, the public affairs team had for weeks been showing signs of overwork, with some employees consistently working overtime to help satisfy the White House’s constant demands for more content, the chat messages showed.

The team had discussed bringing on contract videographers to help address

outstanding tasks — like a new request to shadow every operation of ICE's Special Response Team, the elite SWAT-like unit that handles its most dangerous arrests.

But when protests over mass deportation swept L.A. and Trump ordered the deployment of the National Guard in June, the White House ramped up the pressure yet again. Top officials wanted ICE's public affairs unit to produce more visuals, messages from June 10 show.

The National Guard deployment presented a challenge for a unit trained to cover preplanned and targeted operations: a vast, citywide video shoot where clashes with protesters could flare up at any time.

In the chats, the team strategized how to stretch out its content.

Around 1 p.m., Covington, the ICE public affairs assistant director, instructed her team to highlight arrests in Los Angeles at the White House's request.

ICE began to post a flurry of tweets on X in quick succession — almost every half hour. They included visuals of recent immigration raids and mug shots of people the agency said were undocumented immigrants with a criminal history.

ICE tweeted 38 times over 11 hours. Earlier in the day, the account had posted only three times.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
@ICEgov

June 10
1:02 p.m.

📷Check out this photo of our federal team arresting a previously removed Dominican national June 5. The alien fled onto a roof and went into another residence before he was captured.

🔍While we ramp up criminal aliens arrests & removals, @CBP is preventing illegal reentries.

Officials also floated more ideas to maximize coverage, including pulling in military videographers, known as “combat cameras,” to offer “direct support of designated hotspots.” One official warned the idea came with too many risks, in part because they had been trained for battle, not protests. “It’s different than war photography in a few distinct ways,” the official said.

The White House directive around the L.A. protests forced the agency to play more of an “attack-dog” role online to keep up with the administration’s

demands, one former worker on the DHS media team told The Post.

Law enforcement officers stand guard outside a detention center in Los Angeles on June 10, the day a curfew took hold following clashes in days prior between protesters and law enforcement. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

“That was the turning point to get even more aggressive with their messaging, and to paint pictures of these places as war-torn,” he said. “There was a much more blustery edge, and a need to put stuff out as quickly as you can. You’re steamrolling everything.”

The White House has benefited from this symbiotic relationship: The most-watched video on its TikTok account, with more than 45 million views, included DHS operational footage, a photo of a crying arrestee and the caption, “Ahhh that deportation feeling …” (It has since been removed, but the White House declined to say why.)

In the weeks after the June 10 directive, many National Guard troops left L.A., but the ICE public affairs team kept working at a rapid pace, the chats showed. As plainclothes ICE agents began ramping up arrests of immigrants at courthouses, an ICE official urged the team to "flood all your local social with the imagery from the arrests!"

The pace became so demanding that one official complained of overwork.

When video producers weren't available, public affairs officers were sent into the field to record ICE activities on their phones — a footage "force multiplier," one DHS official said in an interview. Officers were traveling more to fill the White House's almost insatiable demand for visuals, another official said.

The push, however, left some of the officials fearful for their safety in the field. In July, DHS said, an ICE public affairs specialist was sent to the emergency room with a bloodied hand after being hit by a thrown rock outside a California marijuana farm.

During an all-team meeting attended by public affairs officers, an official said he had been sent in a T-shirt to scenes where agents were wearing body armor, an ICE official recalled. (An ICE spokesman said the agency now ensures that public affairs officials have protective equipment, including body armor and first

aid kits.)

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Still, public affairs officials have participated in the immigration operations. In September, Covington said in an internal chat message that she had been on a ride-along with federal agents when an immigrant from Venezuela was apprehended. “Target was a runner - I spotted him and we made the arrest,” she wrote.

She uploaded photos of the man in handcuffs and asked in the chat whether he had been a known gang member, saying he “had some interesting tats.” An ICE legal associate told her their files showed no evidence of gang membership. Some of her colleagues congratulated her nonetheless. “Go [Public Affairs Office] Go!” one replied.

The White House’s frenzy for more content, and DHS officials’ scramble to produce, led the team to push the boundaries in ways that disturbed some of its employees.

ICE’s X account posted a video of a bound protester in Portland, Ore., being

wheeled into custody face down on a flatbed cart, with the background lyrics, "they see me rollin'." DHS's account posted a clip of Illinois protesters and said, "Get a job you imbecilic morons." It also shared a Halloween-styled montage of arrestees' mug shots and warned there would be "no sanctuary for creatures & criminals of the night."

"They just went nuts," a recently departed DHS producer told The Post. "It was no limit. … It was like if someone from Reddit took over."

Some prosecutors in U.S. attorneys' offices complained to public affairs officials that the brash social media posts could jeopardize their cases by raising questions about bias or tainting the jury pool, one official said. (McLaughlin, the DHS spokeswoman, said she'd not heard this and said that if officials are so concerned about it, they should convey it to her, not journalists.)

But that style of crass humor was also common in the ICE team's internal chats. Four days after Trump's inauguration, an official shared a meme that read like a warning to migrants inside the country: "Hide Yo Wife. Hide Yo Kids." Another official poked fun at a migrant's mug shot, labeling him an "MS13 heart throb" in reference to the gang.

In June, after Los Angeles Dodgers officials said they had blocked ICE agents from accessing their parking lots, one ICE official made a joke about the team's Japanese superstar pitcher, who has played for American teams since 2018.

McLaughlin said that every organization has "conversations that you don't think are going to get out to the public" but that she is not "going to lose sleep over" anything in the messages.

ICE's shifting attitude toward public messaging was especially noticeable in its use of music without the artists' or labels' permission, current and former DHS officials said, which past administrations had been far more cautious about. Some officials said in the chat that they were indifferent to the potential perils. When one employee raised concerns about copyright violations, another wrote back, dismissing them.

At least five DHS and ICE videos have been taken down from X in recent months following complaints from representatives of the comedian Theo Von, the band MGMT, and rappers Jay-Z, Joey Valence, and Chamillionaire. Other companies and creators have complained that their intellectual property was used without permission, including the Pokémon Co., whose cartoon style was mimicked for a DHS video captioned "Gotta Catch 'Em All."

Trump administration officials have defended the intensity of their media operation to reporters by saying it's what Americans want: visual proof that Trump is fulfilling his promise to deport millions of immigrants nationwide.

But ICE's social media onslaught appears to have done little to change Americans' attitudes en masse. The share of Americans saying immigration is a good thing for the country leaped to 79 percent in July, a record high, a Gallup poll found in July. About 62 percent of Americans said they disliked how Trump was handling the issue.

Despite this, the media operations at DHS show no signs of slowing down. Inside the ICE team, the chats showed, many were proud of their work — and committed for the long haul.

In August, after an ICE official shared census numbers showing the country's immigrant population had dropped by 2 million, an ICE legal associate responded simply: "Only 40 million to go."

About this story

Videos from ICEGov/X. Some messages were shortened for clarity.

Reporting by Joyce Sohyun Lee and Drew Harwell. Jeremy B. Merrill contributed to this report. Design and development by Stephanie Hays. Design editing by Christian Font. Story editing by Alexis Sobel Fitts and Elyse Samuels. Copy editing by Christopher Rickett.

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